DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 316 FL 016 298

AUTHOR Meara, Paul
TITLE Psycholinguistics and Language Learning: Some Reservations.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.; In: Psycholinguistics and Foreign Language Learning. Papers from a conference (Stockholm, Sweden and Abo, Finland, October 25-26, 1982); see FL 016 291.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Applied Linguistics; English; *Intellectual Disciplines; Language Processing; Learning Theories; *Linguistic Theory; Professional Development; *Psycholinguistics; *Research Methodology; *Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

It is a good thing for the field of applied linguistics to adopt experimental methods of research where appropriate and to think more in terms of testable models of second language processing. However, there is a threat of psycholinguistics becoming the parent discipline, most likely temporary, of applied linguistics. This would be unwise for two reasons: (1) the bulk of the current work in psycholinguistics is in English, narrowly based, and difficult to generalize from; and (2) psycholinguistics is not asking the right questions about second language learning. To become allied with psycholinguistics would perpetuate applied linguistics' status as a second-level, dependent discipline lacking an intrinsically coherent intellectual framework. The profession must find its own priorities and become more self-confident and assertive about pursuing them. Three figures are included. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED276316

PSYCHOLINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: SOME RESERVATIONS

Paul Meara

Department of Applied Linguistics

Birkbeck College

London University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N. Enkvist

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

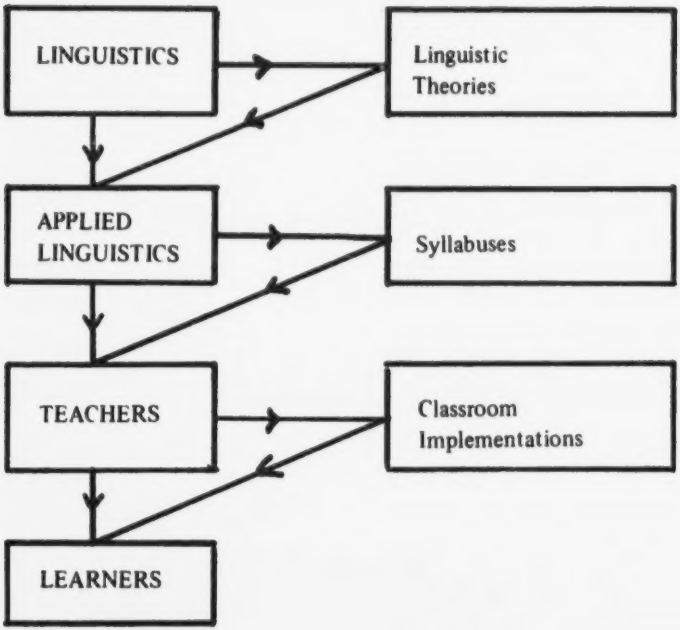
FL 016 298

Paul Meara
Dept of Applied Linguistics
Birkbeck College
London University

PSYCHOLINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: SOME RESERVATIONS

In 1973, Pit Corder described a model of the World of Applied Linguistics which looked something like the model shown in figure 1.

Fig. 1. Applied Linguistics and Other Disciplines



The topmost level of Corder's model was inhabited by the Theoretical Linguist, whose role was to study languages and to derive Theories about them on the basis of the observations that he made. Beneath the Theoretical Linguist came the Applied Linguist. His task was to take the Theories produced by the Theoretical Linguist, to work on the descriptions the linguists produced, and to turn them eventually into Pedagogical Grammars. These Pedagogical Grammars were in turn passed onto the next level of the model, which was inhabited by real Teachers. Their job was to implement the ideas of the Applied Linguists by teaching languages using the materials these latter supplied, to the Learners who lived on the lowest level of the structure.

There are, of course, a number of objectionable features about this view of the world – the intensely hierarchical structure that this model implies, for instance, and the way that insights and information are seen as passing only in one direction, from the top to the bottom. Nevertheless, the model does emphasize one feature which was actually very characteristic of Applied Linguistics in the 1970's: its almost total dependence on theoretical linguistics as a source of ideas and insights. Indeed, it used to be remarked (somewhat scurrillously) that Applied Linguists were generally those who were not clever enough to do real linguistics on their own! Fortunately, the position has changed somewhat in recent years.

In one important respect, however, the position has not really changed at all. Applied Linguistics is still a client discipline, just as it was 10 years ago. The principal difference is that we now acknowledge a number of different "real" disciplines on which we rely; sociolinguistics, child language acquisition, and now more cautiously, psycholinguistics, have all in their turn been added to theoretical linguistics as a source of ideas, and each in its turn has influenced the type of work that applied linguists do and consider important.

The current fashion is for us all to become psycholinguists, and to base our methods and models on what is currently considered important in psycholinguistics. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong in this, and indeed, there is much to be gained from adopting some of the rigorous methods which characterise psycholinguistic work and which are notably lacking from much of applied linguistics. Nevertheless, it seems to me that simply relying on psycholinguistics in the same way as we have relied on other disciplines in the past is not perhaps the best way for our discipline to develop. There are two main reasons for this, both of which have to do with serious limitations of psycholinguistics as it is practiced today.

The first reason for reacting cautiously to the move in the direction of psycholinguistics is that though the general methods used may be of importance to those of us who are interested in second language acquisition, much of the current work in psycholinguistics is very narrowly based, and difficult to generalize from. The most obvious example of this is the way that practically the whole of current psycholinguistic research is based on English, with only occasional forays into other languages, and even then rarely straying outside the Indo-European fold. As languages go, English is a pretty bizarre one. It has a particularly complex phonology, and a highly irregular orthography; its vocabulary is derived from a series of complex interactions with other languages; its morphology is so simple that it has been seriously suggested that the language can fruitfully be considered as a sort of Nordic pidgin. Still, despite these complicating characteristics, it is an easy matter to find instances of psycholinguists assuming that what holds for English will hold willy-nilly on a universal level as well. One good example of this is Fodor, Bever and Garrett (1974), whose book contains only one example of an experiment that was not carried out in English. This example, with material in Dutch, translates morpheme for morpheme onto English, and the whole discussion is written as if the experiment had actually been carried out in English!

My own belief is that this dependence on English is a Very Bad Thing. It is relatively easy to find instances of languages where the basic assumptions one makes about the way native speakers handle a language just do not apply, and where it is perfectly obvious that some other mechanism must be operating. A particularly good example of this is the field of word recognition – an area where we have a pretty good idea of what goes on in native English speakers. Low-level characteristics, such as word structure, are unfortunately characteristics where there are marked differences between languages, and it is a simple matter to find instances of languages where even the most basic aspects of our current English-based word-recognition models just do not apply. Many examples will readily spring to mind, but let me give one example from my own work on Welsh.

It is widely believed that initial consonants play a very important role in word handling in English (Marslen-Wilson 1978, for instance). Welsh, in common with other Celtic languages, enjoys a phenomenon known as initial consonant mutation. This process causes the initial consonant of a word to

change, according to a wide range of syntactic and morphological contexts. Some of these changes are shown in figure 2.

Fig. 2. Mutations in Welsh

Orthography:

basic form	p	t	x	b	d	g	ll	m	rh
soft mutation	b	d	g	f	dd	ø	l	f	r
nasal mutation	mh	nh	ngh	m	n	mg	– no change –		
spirant mutation	ph	th	ch	– no change –			– no change –		

Phonology:

basic form	p	t	k	b	d	g		m	r
soft mutation	b	d	g	v	ð	ø	l	v	r
spirant mutation	f	ø	x	– no change –			– no change –		

Some examples:

English	Orthography	Phonology
a cat	cath	kaø
your cat	dy gath	də gaø
my cat	fy nghath	vəŋ haø
her cat	ei chath	ei xaø
a ball	pêl	pel
your ball	dy bêl	də bel
my ball	fy mhêl	və mhel
her ball	ei phêl	ei fel
a garden	gardd	garð
my garden	fy ngardd	va arð
your garden	dy ardd	da arð
her garden	ei gardd	ei garð

These changes are linguistically quite simple, but if we assume that word recognition models that work for English should also apply in the case of other languages, then one would expect this phenomenon to be extremely disruptive of word handling behaviour. Interestingly, this does indeed appear

to be the case for native English speakers who learn Welsh; for this group, mutations are a serious source of difficulty. Native Welsh speakers, however, do not seem to suffer any handicaps due to the mutation system, and indeed they can even cope easily with the forms which result from interactions between mutations and spoonerisms – forms which by English standards are extremely bizarre. (See figure 3).

Fig. 3. Interactions between mutations and spoonerisms in Welsh

O = orthographic form
T = translation
I = intended form (in phonetic transcription)
E = the resulting erroneous form

1: O: ... tri baner goch ... T: three red flags
I: [.... baner gox ....]
E: [.... xaner fox ....]

2: O: ... y mân wahaniethau T: the small differences
I: [.... man wahanieθai]
E: [.... gwan fahanieθai]

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that the characteristics of models devised to describe word-handling in English are not going to be adequate when we work with Welsh – or with a variety of other languages which are not closely related to English. In order to describe adequately what goes on in these languages, we may need to discover some radically different operating principles. This in its turn also raises some interesting questions about the psychology of word handling in second languages. If Arabic and Finnish, for example, both differ in different ways from English, then one might expect Arabs learning English to have word handling problems which are quite different from those of Finnish learners of English. At the moment, however, we know practically next to nothing about contrastive psycholinguistics of this sort, and even less about the implications of these phenomena for second language acquisition, and psycholinguistics is not going to be able to throw much light on these problems until it becomes much less Anglo-centric.

The second reason for being somewhat cautious about the influence of psycholinguistics is that, from the point of view of second language acquisition, at least, psycholinguistics is not really asking the right questions. Recent years have seen a marked shift away from work on fairly low-level phenomena such as word recognition and sentence processing to more abstract higher-order phenomena such as discourse processing and the handling of underlying schemata. My own feeling is that this is not a good thing for Applied Linguistics. There seems to be a strong case for the view that languages are fairly similar at an abstract level, while they differ importantly at lower levels of organization. At the same time, it also seems reasonable to argue that these low level features are precisely the ones which have the biggest influence on the development of different psycholinguistic strategies. Psycholinguistic descriptions of higher order processes seem much more likely to have universal validity than descriptions of what goes on at a lower level, which appears to be much more bound in with specific languages. If this is true, then any shift away from low-level phenomena towards a more abstract level of analysis is likely to mean that psycholinguistics will become increasingly less relevant to the study of second language acquisition. Such a shift is implicit in the current rapprochement between psycholinguistics and Artificial Intelligence, and if it continues, we will once again find ourselves without a natural home.

To sum up, then, it is clearly a good thing for Applied Linguistics to adopt experimental methods where these are appropriate, and to think much more in terms of testable models of what handling an L2 might involve. On the other hand, it would be a great pity if psycholinguistics were to become merely the next of a sequence of parent disciplines whose umbrella we work under for a few years before moving on to its successor. This would merely perpetuate our status as a second division, dependent discipline, lacking an intrinsically coherent intellectual framework. Talking to colleagues from other disciplines can often be an embarrassing experience for an applied linguist. People in general have little awareness of why second language acquisition is an interesting phenomenon, or why it has enormous potential importance on a social level. I am quite convinced that this is mainly due to the way we have latched ourselves onto other disciplines, and that the way we have subordinated ourselves to the theoretical concerns of others is something that has done us lasting harm. The only way in which we are going to alter

this state of affairs is for us to work out what our own priorities are, and then to become more self-confident and assertive about pursuing them. A permanent, on-going search for a parent-discipline, or willing acquiescence in the implications of a model like figure one, is incompatible with the self-respect that we ought to have.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Corder, S.P. (1973), *Introducing Applied Linguistics*. Harmondsworth. Penguin Education.

Fodor, J.A, T.G. Bever and M.F. Garrett (1974), *The Psychology of Language*. New York. McGraw-Hill.

Marslen-Wilson, W.D. and A. Welsh (1978), "Processing Interactions and lexical access during word recognition in continuous speech." *Cognitive Psychology*. 10, 29-63.